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ABSTRACT

Although listening has been shown to be the most frequent communication activity, and students desperately need listening training, the educational system usually ignores listening. After citing 10 bad listening habits which interfere with good aural communication and describing the characteristics of effective listeners, this paper offers 12 listening exercises that can be used by instructors in a wide variety of academic fields. Finally, the paper briefly describes a successful listening course taught at St. Edward's University in Austin, Texas, and its impact over the last 10 years. Thirteen references are attached. (PRA)

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IMPROVING STUDENTS' LISTENING SKILLS

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"To do all the talking and not be willing to listen is a form of greed."
(Democritus of Abderu, Greece, 5th-4th century B.C.)

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When I tell people, *"I teach listening,"* their first response is often a bemused smile or a *"Huh?"* Teaching students to listen may strike you as strange. However, listening is a basic communication vehicle that we all depend upon. It can be practiced and integrated into every area of college teaching and learning.

Some years ago, Rankin (1928) found that the communication day was divided into the following activities: **writing**—9%, **speaking**—16%, **reading**—30%, and **listening**—45%. This study has often been replicated by others (e.g., Wolvin & Coakley, 1983). It shows that **listening is *the most frequent* communication activity**. Listening makes up almost half of our efforts spent in communication.

Despite this, our educational system usually ignores listening. Grade school pupils spend less than 10% of their school day (Wolvin & Coakley, 1983) in purposeful teacher-directed listening training. Even less training is offered as students progress to middle school, high school, and then to college. The true irony is that students desperately need listening training. The average student listens at only 20% efficiency (Nichols & Stevens, 1957). Most classroom teaching is delivered by means of lectures, even though students miss about 80% of all that is said in the classroom! To remedy this sad state of affairs teachers should join together to create a more effective learning environment.

In the 1950's, Nichols and Stevens (1957) listed **ten *bad* listening habits** which interfere with good aural communication:

1. finding the subject uninteresting,
2. judging the delivery rather than the content,
3. getting too emotionally involved,
4. listening only for specific facts, not central ideas,
5. using inflexible note taking,
6. faking attention to the speaker,
7. being easily distracted,
8. avoiding difficult material,
9. refusing to accept new ideas, and
10. wasting the mental slack time between speech and thought speed.

Nichols and Stevens found that these habits impede the clear reception of spoken messages. Poor listeners often complain that the topic of a lecture is boring or that the speaker is not exciting. While both these observations may have validity, **communication is a two-way street.** The listener must *also* assume responsibility for properly interpreting the message. The listener as well as the speaker must work.

Untrained listeners often listen only for specific items and miss the overall message of the speech. Or they become so emotionally involved—agreeing or disagreeing with the ideas—that their feelings become an obstacle to efficient understanding. Open-mindedness is an asset in listening as well as other areas. Bad habit number ten reminds us that, while **people speak at about 100 to 125 words per minute, they can easily listen at 300 words per minute** (Barker, 1971). We listen poorly because we feel that the speaker is taking too long to finish her or his thought, and so we simply find other topics of more interest to think about. "Think-time" is about three times more efficient than "talk-time," so daydreaming often results. The intangible—but crucial—link between speaker and listener is broken and the exchange of ideas fails to occur. Talking and listening require an *active* interchange in which *both* sides share responsibility for the accurate transmission of the message. In every speaking/listening event there must be a continual effort on the part of both speaker and listener to monitor how accurately the word picture is being constructed in the minds of both partners.

Characteristics of Effective Listeners

Effective listeners exhibit several attributes. They have an **authentic and continuing concern for the message** and a **steadfast determination to understand and share the information with others.** A good listener is also **unselfish, open-minded, and curious. Unselfishness** is manifested by their ability to put aside personal problems in order to **listen with full attention.** It is crucial for effective listening that the message (both the emotional and the intellectual content) be of paramount concern. The message takes precedent over all other considerations. Good listeners **make sure the message is fully received** before making any judgments. Therefore, they **rarely interrupt**, either covertly through internal mental activity, or overtly through voiced interjections. **Open-mindedness** is shown in the listeners' ability to **hear someone out** when the opinion of the speaker is in considerable conflict with the feelings of the listener. Finally, **curiosity** is reflected by the listener's commitment

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to inquiry, by the search for the connectedness of all understanding and knowledge, and by the pursuit of new insights wherever they may lead.

Effective Listeners Do the Following:

Preparing To Listen.
—Come to class well rested, with a good grasp of readings and extra assignments.

Active Listening.
—ask questions in class (both summary and clarifying),
—take appropriate notes—listing key information for later review as well as problem areas that deserve further study,
—talk and listen in class discussions,
—look at the speaker,
—nod or give other tangible evidence of interest in the message,
—rarely interrupt.

Complementary Activities to Effective Listening.
—like to participate in small group discussions,
—ask questions before and after class,
—get help when a difficult concept is introduced,
—ask for comments on reports and tests,
—volunteer to give oral reports.

Positive Listening Results.
—work to constantly improve understanding,
—show awareness of the importance of listening by sharing listening techniques.

In any person who is becoming a better listener, **the primary change is a change in attitude**. A person becomes more resolved to learn from others and to acknowledge that *everyone* has something to teach us. Studies and surveys (e.g., Brue, 1988) have shown that most people highly value co-workers and employers who are skilled listeners, listeners who show their interest in others by their focused and genuine empathy. This is an important lesson: **people relate to us in large part because of our relative effectiveness in communication.**

The role of speaking in communication is obvious, but listening is also crucial in completing the communication circle. Without good listeners verbal messages are never really received. Anecdotal evidence indicates that other countries such as China, Japan, and Germany produce students who listen more effectively than students in the United States. If this is true, then we must improve the teaching of this overlooked area. The reward for a good speech is applause. We must also seek the subtle, but powerful reward for good listening: the improved connectedness with the people around us. A student is rewarded for better listening by better grades. An instructor is rewarded for his or her improved listening by increased learning and a classroom atmosphere where the emphasis is on sharing and dialogue.

Listening Exercises

There are a number of listening exercises that can be used by instructors in a wide variety of academic fields. These exercises can help the students—and the instructors—improve their listening skills. Good listening exercises establish and maintain excellent **contact between the speaker and listener** and **create the opportunity for all learners to experience the role of *both* listener *and* speaker**. These exercises can be shared activities that link the speaker and listener into a world of mutual responsibility. Both the speaker and the listener must want to communicate and both must accept responsibility for the accurate transmission of ideas. This shared communication requires 1) **clarity in speech**, 2) **focused listening**, 3) **clarifying questions**, and 4) **accurate feedback for both parties**. Listening training can be part of learning in any discipline and should use the content of the course itself whenever possible. The following exercises will illustrate the principle of shared responsibility in speaking and listening.

Lecture Notes. Students are expected to take consistent, accurate, and effective notes. In order to shape this behavior, **notes must be modeled, checked, and used**. A model of good notes—written either by the teacher or better yet by a student—can be made into a transparency and shown to the class. These model notes can then be compared to other students' notes and analyzed by the individual student or in small groups of five or less. Notes can also be checked by student facilitators for length, legibility, and accuracy. These inspections can be done quickly with a simple four-point rating system—superior, satisfactory, marginal, or unsatisfactory. After several sessions of discussing model notes and inspecting the students' notes, mock exams can be created using a series of lecture notes as basic exam material. From these mock exams students can learn what kind of questions to expect. They can also be encouraged to formulate their own test questions by using their notes to identify the crucial points of several lectures. As stated before, notes must be modeled, checked and used in order to create a class of responsible listeners who have tangible evidence of their participation in the learning process.

Current Events. One way to promote good listening and an atmosphere of sharing at the beginning of a lecture is to make a standing offer to the students to use the first three minutes of class to present any item from the mass media relevant to the class. The presenter's reward could be points added to the final grade. However, the true reward is an increased awareness of the larger world outside the class and a willingness to connect all information into a larger pattern.

Paired Exercises. In classes that permit exercises with pairs, there are several listening possibilities. All of these exercises feature shared responsibility for the message and shared time for *both* members of the pair to be speaker and listener. In **situations calling for labeling or diagramming**, one person reads from a master sheet—for example an anatomy chart with all the appropriate names given—while the partner listens to descriptions and directions and fills in prepared blanks on his or her chart. Then the roles are reversed. When the charts are complete, both partners check on the accuracy of their message both sending and receiving.

Another pair exercise involves listening in its most elemental and most important context. This exercise calls for the speaker to deliver **a monologue of about three minutes**. The listener simply pays close attention and remains silent. After the speaker is finished, the listener repeats the message—including both the intellectual and the emotional content. This part of the exercise is finished only when the speaker is satisfied that *both* the cognitive *and* affective aspects of the monologue have been accurately described by the listener. Then the roles are

reversed and the speaker becomes the listener. This exercise emphasizes complete and accurate feedback for the speaker and responsibility on the part of the listener.

Oral Reports. Ask students to make short oral reports, **then give a short quiz**—including some questions generated by the student who made the report—to make sure the listeners have received the message. Limit the quiz to six to ten questions. Some modeling of appropriate questions on the part of the teacher, both focused and open-ended questions, will help the students develop good questions. These mini-tests can be graded quickly by classmates. For example, in a history class short reports on key events, concepts, or trends will reinforce class lectures. In geology or biology classes, specific subsets of information can also be reviewed in this manner.

Library Research. Students' library research can be summarized by reports to small groups or to the entire class. Then ask the listeners to identify main ideas, supporting evidence, and principle means of persuasion (emotional appeals, statistical evidence, use of authority, etc.). It is particularly useful when the students disagree on specific emotional or content issues because it illustrates how difficult it is to communicate effectively. It also reinforces that both the speaker and the listener have responsibilities. Guided discovery led by the instructor and practice will help improve consensus. Library reports and other kinds of oral presentations should be short and focused. They are best implemented in small groups of about five to seven people.

Film or Video Presentation. These can be enhanced by preparing an outline of some of the major points (using or paraphrasing parts of the script) and **leaving some regularly spaced blanks** where the listener will have to fill in missing phrases or words. This makes the student stay involved and helps in anticipatory listening. **Anticipatory listening** is literally "listening ahead" by trying to guess how the speaker will finish a thought. **Around 20 to 30 blanks** in a **20 minute** tape is a good rule of thumb. Focused listening should result in at least 80 percent accuracy. Using a commercially prepared slide or video with a script included will make this exercise much easier.

Model Outline. As a starter exercise to shape good note-taking, the teacher can **provide a partial outline for a given lecture**. The basic points for the lecture are provided, but some information is left out. As the outline continues, more and more information is omitted in order to force the note-taker to be more active. These fill-in outlines can be easily checked by the instructor or by students exchanging with other students.

Brief Teacher Presentations. The teacher can encourage good listening by **talking for a brief period** and then **asking the students for a summary or outline** of the major ideas just presented. Standard forms for these exercises can be easily generated which ask for the main idea, supporting details, methods of persuasion, etc. These encourage the students to be more active, more analytical, and more responsible. The students become accustomed to having their daily work checked and come to see each lecture as significant. These exercises could be graded by having the students exchange papers or they can be graded by the teacher on a two-point scale: acceptable or not acceptable.

If there is any moment in the class when a change of pace is needed or one activity needs a bridge into the next, the following three exercises could be considered.

Exercise in Precise Description. One exercise starts with two plastic bags containing 10 geometric shapes made of construction paper (one complete set per bag) and two people. The facilitator asks one person from each pair of participants to take one bag and arrange *eight* of the shapes in any pattern while describing this pattern to his or her partner. The listening partner sits with his or her back to the speaker and *without seeing* the pattern, *nor* being able to ask questions, tries to arrange his or her pieces in exactly the same pattern as the speaker. When the pieces have been arranged, the partners turn around to see if their patterns match. Then, the speaker and the listener change roles and the exercise is repeated. This is a rather graphic demonstration of the *exclusive* nature of language and of the need for precision in communication.

Rumor Mill. A short (2 or 3 paragraph) story with a good number of specific facts is read to one member of a team of six listeners—the other five members of the listening team wait out of hearing range. The rest of the class are given copies of the story. The story is repeated from person to person while the rest of the class note additions, deletions, and distortions to the original message. Team participants may *not* see the story, and *may only hear it once*. However, they can ask questions of the person relating the message.

Birthdays. A very quick listening exercise simply asks every person in a room to say the month and day of her or his birthday. After everyone has given the month and the day, a line is formed starting with January 1st through December 31st. Participants are told what is going to happen before the exercise starts, but are not allowed to repeat their dates or ask questions after the exercise begins.

These suggestions for improved listening in the classroom are intended to be only the beginning to develop a more interactive learning environment. Good listening can be achieved in many different ways. This is because listening involves a broad spectrum of behaviors. Just as there are a number of different learning styles for students, there are a number of differing teaching styles for instructors. Each teacher will have to adapt, to innovate, and to individualize in order to create the optimal learning climate.

Several themes concerning listening training do, however, seem to emerge from the experience of effective teachers. It appears that ***all* students need to be encouraged to think of themselves as *both* speakers *and* listeners**. Therefore, student-teacher exchanges should be facilitated. Another theme is that **students' listening accuracy should be examined *often,*** both by formal tests and on an informal (non-graded) basis. To achieve these two goals, using both small group activities—working with five to seven individuals—and student facilitators—peers with a high motivation to assist in the learning process—will help create a more dynamic, more complete time of shared learning and shared excitement.

Can Listening Skills Be Taught?

At St. Edward's University in Austin, Texas, we have taught a listening skills course to between one third to one half of our entering freshman *who show the need for increased listening skills.* Every Monday the class has a general lecture, and during the rest of the week, the students meet in groups of 15. They are taught on a mastery basis using small group dynamics and student interns. Mastery education is based on the belief that almost everyone can be taught. Students are encouraged to re-do each essential exercise until the instructor believes they have mastered the crucial elements of that step in the learning process. In this way almost all the students can satisfactorily learn the essentials of the material being offered. Ten years of data on these listening classes have convinced our administration and faculty that listening training does pay for both the student and the school.

Using the Brown-Carlsen Listening Test (1955) in its two parallel versions for the last ten years, St. Edward's University has demonstrated the effectiveness of structured listening training. The Brown-Carlsen test was normed in the 1950's for high school and college listening behavior. It has 76 questions and takes 45-50 minutes to administer. Using the Brown-Carlsen scores for placement, around 120 students are selected each Fall for the listening course. Results from 20 semesters of tests before and after the course show significant positive increases in the students' listening scores when compared to those of students who did not take the course. First, the difference in Brown-Carlsen scores between the non-listening lab and listening lab participants of the listening lab students increased dramatically. In the Fall of 1979, the entry percentage of listening lab students was 9.3 and the exit percentage was 18.4. The numbers for 1983 were 10.0 and 43.0. Finally, in 1988 the improvement on scores was 29.0 to 54.0. Listening score improvements have been consistent and quite impressive. Even more significant, our follow-up studies show that the listening lab contributes to a real improvement in self-image, in students' willingness to take more course work, in grade-point-average, and in the probability of graduating from college. The students appreciate the instruction and even the teachers have noted more active questioning in their classes. A class of attentive listeners encourages superior teaching and a more complete learning environment.

St. Edward's has found the approaches described in this paper to be very helpful in improving our students' listening skills. We hope that they will be equally effective with your students!

"Those of you who are interested in how the curriculum can be structured to develop better listening skills might want to take a look at the program that has been developed at St. Edward's University in Austin, Texas."
(Astin, 1988, p. 8.)

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Another widely-used college level Listening test is the Watson-Barker Listening test normed in the 1980's. A complete discussion of Listening assessment is found in **Curriculum Review**, vol. 23, no. 1, of February 1984 (p. 22-24) article by Sara W. Lundsteen.

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